



Examining Equity in Remote Learning Plans: A Content Analysis of State Responses to COVID-19

TECHNICAL REPORT

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The Learning Partnership

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Examining Equity in Remote Learning Plans: A Content Analysis of State Responses to COVID-19

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Abstract

In this technical report, the authors present a content analysis of state guidance on remote learning from the 2019-20 school year. As schools across the country closed in response to COVID-19, state education agencies (SEAs) developed guidance for use by districts on how to ensure the continuation of education during the pandemic. The described analysis applied an equity framework that was developed based on concepts drawn from a literature review to examine the extent to which SEAs addressed issues of equity in their remote learning recommendations. The analysis revealed variation in the extent to which states explicitly focused on equity in their guidance. The analysis also identified exemplar states that encouraged local educators to keep equity at the forefront of their planning.

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Introduction

School closures due to COVID-19 impacted over 55 million students across the nation in the spring of 2020. All states and territories closed schools for extensive periods of time between March and June, with most eventually closing for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. State education agencies (SEAs) responded to the rapid closure of school systems by issuing guidance to districts on how to continue to provide educational and social services to students during the pandemic. This guidance included recommendations for implementing remote learning as well as strategies for addressing technology and connectivity issues. At the same time, education researchers and policy organizations published articles and policy briefs highlighting the need to attend to equity when designing remote learning experiences for students (Dreesen et al., 2020; Kirkland, 2020; Morgan, 2020). In one such report published by the Education Trust and Digital Promise (2020), the following statement was provided regarding the importance of focusing on equity issues when planning for remote learning during school closures:

Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups such as homeless students and students in foster care, were less likely to have rigorous, engaging, and positive educational experiences before the pandemic. There is a real risk that school closures will deepen these existing inequities in our education system (p. 1).

In this technical report, the authors share findings from a content analysis of SEA remote learning guidance documents developed during the 2019-20 school closures. Our research design and data collection were guided by the following research question: To what extent and in what ways do SEA guidance documents on remote learning address issues of equity?

Guidance from the SEAs about remote learning was developed and disseminated in the midst of a global pandemic that was (and continues to be) incredibly disruptive to all aspects of life, including schooling. This unprecedented situation has complicated research on remote learning (Tobin, 2020; Warner, 2020). Further, scholars have argued that the emergency remote learning, or “pandemic pedagogy,” that students are experiencing is substantially different from well-planned remote or online learning that can take years to design (Millman, 2020). Given the extraordinary circumstances of continuing to provide education in a pandemic, we do not want our research to be interpreted as a critical evaluation of states’ rapid responses to the necessary move to remote learning. Rather, we see this as a potentially informative examination of the ways in which states have attempted to address issues of inequity with their guidance to districts and schools.

Framework for Equity

To conduct the analysis, we developed a framework for equity by drawing out critical aspects of equitable learning that have been identified in the literature on education in remote contexts. Specifically, we conducted a search of the literature on remote learning and equity in peer-reviewed journals as well as a

search of articles and recent blog posts on the websites of education research and policy organizations. From this literature review, we developed a framework of equity with four broad dimensions:

1. **Access to technology.** Students' and families' ability to access devices and the internet is critically important for equitable remote learning (Auxier & Anderson, 2020; Education Trust, 2020; Journell, 2007; Malkus & Christensen, 2020). Research on broadband internet access has found that 15% of U.S. households with school-age children do not have broadband access; moreover, disparities exist in broadband use by race and ethnicity (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). State plans should address the digital divide by providing recommendations for improving access to learning resources and technology. In addition, state guidance should include recommendations for surveying technology needs.
2. **Home learning environments.** The social resources in students' home learning contexts are other critical components that can contribute to inequity (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Dreesen et al., 2020; Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020; Warschauer, 2020). States should help support home learning environments by emphasizing consistent, clear communication with students and families and recommending gathering feedback from caregivers on their remote learning experiences and needs. Furthermore, states should encourage schools and districts to include family members as co-facilitators of learning.
3. **Teacher and student readiness.** As part of the adjustment to a very different context for teaching and learning, schools and districts must attend to the professional needs of teachers and the educational needs of diverse student populations (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners) to create an equitable learning environment (Education Trust, 2020; Kirkland, 2020; Rice, 2018; Selwyn, 2020; Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020). State guidance should encourage districts to provide teachers with the requisite resources and professional learning opportunities in order to successfully provide high-quality and equitable instruction for students. Moreover, students who require specialized instruction and related services must be provided with the necessary support and accommodations.
4. **Programmatic offerings and policy.** The state guidelines for programmatic offerings and policies (e.g., instructional time each day, grading policies, and/or multiple delivery methods for instruction) during remote learning are also highly relevant for issues of equity (Dreesen et al., 2020; Hedger, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Such policies can impact students and families in various ways, particularly those with limited access to technology and other resources.

The equity framework was used to conduct a content analysis of the SEA documents (see Appendix Table A for the full framework).

Methods and Data

To explore whether and how states were emphasizing equity in remote learning, we collected documents containing remote learning guidance from each SEA and examined them. Data collection posed a particular challenge for this project. Given that many SEAs have developed extensive web pages that include resources and links related to all aspects of responding to the pandemic—including nutrition, mental health, and family resources—it was necessary to clearly demarcate what data we would collect

from each SEA site. For purposes of scoping and consistency in the data collection process, we used the following criteria for selection:

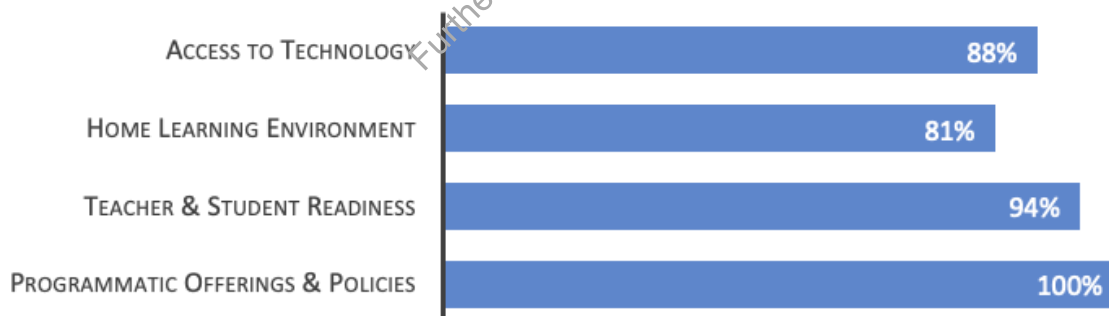
1. The document must be located on the SEA website.
2. The document must have been developed to provide guidance and recommendations to districts and schools specifically about remote learning (other common terms were *distance learning* and *instructional continuity plans*).
3. The document must have been developed specifically in response to school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using these criteria, we searched each SEA website, located the appropriate document, and recorded the date of collection, length of the document, and web address where the document was located. All documents were collected during a seven-day period in June 2020. Example document titles included “Distance Learning Guidance [Arizona],” “COVID-19 Guidance: Provision of Continuous Learning [Iowa],” and “Remote Learning Resource Guide [Ohio].” We then conducted a content analysis using NVivo software, in which the data were coded and categorized using a pre-figured coding framework based on the equity framework described above. During the analysis, researchers met regularly to discuss the coding process and revise the framework as needed.

Findings

The SEA documents on remote learning guidance varied substantially in length and detail, ranging from 3 pages to 93 pages in length (average length was 23 pages). Given the variation in length of the documents, our analysis focused on aggregate findings across states. Most state documents included in the analysis addressed all four dimensions of equity (75%). As shown in Figure 1, there was some variation in the percentage of states addressing each of the four dimensions.

Figure 1. Percentage of State Remote Learning Guidance Documents that Address the Four Dimensions of Equity



Access to Technology

Given the important role of technology in remote teaching and learning contexts, we expected SEA documents on remote learning to include guidance on ensuring that districts take the necessary steps to

assess technology needs among schools, teachers, and students and, when necessary, address gaps in access to technology. Most state documents did include guidance on technology (88%), and some states provided specific recommendations for gathering information about technology needs (35%). For example, the Mississippi Department of Education document included a series of guiding questions for districts to consider when assessing device and network connectivity issues. These questions included the following:

- What laptops/tablets and how many do you need for your students and teachers? How stable are the laptops/tablets you currently have? Do you have a laptop/tablet refresh plan?
- Do you have the network equipment you need to support technology in the classroom? To support technology needs when students and teachers are working from home?
- Do you know whether each of your students has internet access at home? How many do not have access? How many hotspots would you need to connect all students to the internet?

Home Learning Environments

About 80% of states addressed home learning environments in their remote learning documents (the lowest percentage among the four dimensions of equity in our analysis), which means that one in five SEA documents did not directly address this aspect of equitable remote learning in their guidance. An even lower percentage of states included specific guidance on how schools and districts should communicate remote learning expectations to students and parents (65%). Those SEAs that did address this aspect of home learning environments encouraged districts to consider accessibility and consistency in developing communication plans. The Arizona Department of Education, for example, provided specific steps that schools and districts can take to ensure consistent, accessible communication with families to foster equitable home learning environments:

- Connect with each of your students and their families every week via video chat, Zoom, or phone calls.
- Provide families with a point person to reach out to if they have questions about the distance learning process, or for the latest district information and its impact on schools.
- Create a plan for ongoing guidance for families. Even though it may make sense during the first day and first conversation, families will still need support to continue learning and recognizing success.
- Provide essential communications in languages representative of student and family populations.

Teacher and Student Readiness

Recommendations for diverse learners

A key aspect for addressing equity in remote learning contexts is attending to the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities, English learners, and children and youth experiencing homelessness. We found that 85% of the state documents addressed meeting the needs of diverse learners (in a few cases, the remote learning document referenced another document with details about serving diverse learners). A small percentage (12%) of SEA documents contained only high-level general statements about addressing remote learning for diverse learners, with no specific guidelines for students with disabilities or English learners, for example. The Delaware Department of Education document provided an example of such a general statement: “For students who are at higher risk of learning loss, such as students with disabilities or English learners, we recommend that educators provide additional opportunities for connection.” Many states, however, not only included language about addressing the

needs of diverse learners in remote learning contexts but also provided specific guidance on meeting the needs of students with disabilities (66%) and English learners (55%). The New Mexico Public Education Department remote learning document is an exemplar of more comprehensive guidance for English learners by providing a list of supports (see Table 1).

Table 1. EL Support Guidance from New Mexico's Remote Learning Document

EL Supports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide essential communications in languages representative of student and family populations. • Reach out to families to discuss important facts and school structures for the remainder of the year including the continuous learning plan, how to get breakfast/lunch, and what community groups/contacts/supports are available for the families. • Designate a point person for each EL family to access over-the-phone interpreting and/or specific personnel within the district who can provide interpretation services. • Recognize that resources may need to be adjusted according to different grade levels and language levels. • Provide options and multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge/skills. • Include technology and non-technology options. • Coordinate distribution of hard copies and/or online work. • Collaborate with general education staff to maximize efficiency. • Offer "office hours" via phone and/or computer for scheduled check-ins with students. • Give suggested timelines that allow for students to work at their own paces. • Create or share screen video tutorials about how to use resources for students. • Share resources on how to use translation features in commonly used applications. • Provide strategies that support academic language needs. • Use structured or sheltered English practices and highlight opportunities for students to engage in conversation virtually.

Note: Adapted from *Implementation Guide for Your Continuous Learning Plan* from New Mexico Public Education Department

Only six of the state documents specifically addressed homeless youth. The Hawaii Department of Education's remote learning document serves as an exemplar for addressing homeless youth. A section of the document titled "Continuity of Support for Students in Unstable Housing" outlines how community liaisons will maintain communication with and provide support for families and students in unstable housing during remote learning. With housing insecurity likely to grow across the country as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic, this is an area where states can do more to focus attention on this issue and guide districts in developing responses.

Recommendations for teachers

The guidance documents included a range of recommendations about ensuring teacher preparedness for remote learning. Some states (62%) provided specific suggestions for remote instruction (e.g., altering the

scope and sequence of what is taught, focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy, and fostering authentic learning experiences). The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education document was one that provided guidance on fostering authentic remote learning experiences for students (see Table 2).

Table 2. Guidance on Authentic Learning in Home Settings from Missouri

Learning should look less like...	Learning should look more like...
<p><i>Assignments to “get through” content</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizing memorizing content or “checking off” tasks on lists • Asking students to solve contrived or hypothetical problems or complete design projects that value form over function • Trying to cover content through a volume of activities or skipping from topic to topic 	<p><i>Authentic learning in the home setting</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting questions and problems to household activities such as cooking, fixing things or gardening • Asking students to identify relevant problems in their lives and engage in design cycles to address them • Allowing students to deeply explore phenomena or problems of interest through investigation to build understanding and practice over time

Note: Adapted from *Supporting Educators and Learning in the Era of COVID-19* from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

State guidance also called on districts to provide professional development, with ongoing support, on remote instruction and the use of technology (73% of SEA documents).

Programmatic Offerings and Policies

All SEA documents in the analysis included recommendations for programmatic offerings and policies. These typically included guidance on grading policies and recommendations regarding the length of the remote learning school day.

Local control with state-level influence

About 45% of the state remote learning documents recognized that local districts had the last word in determining how to organize and implement remote learning. Many of these states acknowledged the potential tension between the need for local adaptation while simultaneously ensuring consistency statewide. That is, noting that each community has unique needs and populations of students but that it was also necessary for the state to have a consistent response in order to maintain expectations across the state. The Idaho State Board of Education, for example, addressed this issue, stating:

This guidance will allow local districts and charter schools to respond to their unique populations and community needs, while still assuring for the continuity of services and learning to our Idaho students. Our local school district and charter school leaders will need to be prepared to make decisions and set priorities based on their current situation in their respective communities, and they must be able to do so within a common framework. This will help to establish stability and common expectations for our school districts and charter schools across Idaho.

One specific area where the state guidance on remote learning often deferred to local decision makers was grading policies. Some state guidance documents offered a discrete set of options for districts to choose from in determining grading policies. Other state documents provided examples of how districts around the country were handling grading, criteria for promotion and retention, and other related policies but emphasized flexibility and left the decision to local educators.

Key Takeaways

In addition to our findings related to the four dimensions outlined above, our analysis of the state documents revealed several broader takeaways that cut across the four dimensions.

Emphasizing Less is More

A substantial portion of the guidance documents (38%) encouraged districts to adopt an approach to remote learning that we characterized as *less is more*. In these documents, the SEAs emphasized that districts should primarily review previously covered material or focus on teaching the requisite skills necessary to advance to the next course level. The reasons given for this approach to remote learning were related to equity issues and included acknowledging that completing school assignments online at home takes longer than in-person at school, concerns about unequal access to technology and resources, recognition that students may have additional responsibilities at home and therefore should not be given busy work, and acknowledging that some teachers will struggle with implementing remote teaching during school closures. The guidance from the Michigan Department of Education, for example, included a statement about prioritizing essential standards and reducing the workload for students during remote learning:

Knowing that it will be difficult to teach all the standards before the end of the year, districts should prioritize which standards are most critical for students to learn during this time of closure and narrow their focus to just those. District grade levels and/or departments should collaborate to plan for the content that is to be covered. Every effort should be made to design learning that is reasonable, accessible, and appropriate. It is not advisable to attempt to cover the same breadth or depth of content at a distance. Standards-based instruction should be greatly narrowed in an effort to increase student understanding and to support the varied home lives of our students and their caregivers.

Centering the Student

A major emphasis of many documents that we reviewed was the importance of student-centered remote learning. Districts and schools were encouraged to be flexible and responsive to the differing circumstances faced by students and their families (e.g., uneven access to resources and technology as well as varying home, caretaking, and school/work responsibilities). As described in the Virginia document, “Achieving equity in remote learning is more complex than simply providing equality in access to learning resources and technology” (p. 13); equity requires a deeper level of consideration regarding the impact of inequitable home learning environments on vulnerable student groups. Remote learning guidance that centered the student also emphasized providing students with choices in their

learning (e.g., options for assignments and assessments) and tapping into resources available in students' home learning environments.

Explicit Focus on Equity

We noted a difference between attending to the four dimensions of equity in our framework and explicitly addressing issues of equity. That is, some SEA documents addressed dimensions of the equity framework without using explicit language about the importance of equity. We found that 25% of the remote learning documents did not include specific language about equity (this lack of explicitly addressing equity was not simply a function of document length—the average length of the documents that did not include equity was over 13 pages). Several SEA documents stood out as exemplars for explicitly focusing on equity as a critically important element of remote learning guidance. Alaska's remote learning guidance, for example, emphasized equity by including a section on what culturally responsive teaching looks like during remote learning and including a chart describing what teachers, leaders, families, and students need to know and do to create a culturally responsive teaching environment (see Appendix Table B). As another example, the Oregon Department of Education's (ODE) remote learning document begins with guiding principles that emphasize the importance of equity:

We must heighten our attention to particular groups of students who often bear the burden of the system's oppressive practices. We must see the strengths and meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness, students of color, Alaska Native and American Indian students, emerging bilingual students, students of migrant and farmworker families, students experiencing disability, students in foster care, and students navigating poverty. There is a real risk that students will experience further alienation and lack of access to learning, heightened by the out-of-school context. This risk is magnified by the digital divide and the rapid increase of unemployment in our communities. This lived reality requires resolve and focus as care, connection, and continuity of learning guide our charge.

Another example of a state that explicitly addressed equity in remote learning was Virginia. This plan included three pages of "Equity Considerations" toward the beginning of the document, which encouraged districts and schools to "keep equity at the forefront of [their] planning" (p. 12).

Discussion

Scholars have argued that states play a critical role in ensuring equity in schools and that SEAs must work to create a system that has equity at the center (Zion, 2016). Given that many schools and districts will need to continue to offer remote learning as either the primary approach to schooling or as part of a hybrid model of education in the 2020-2021 school year, and possibly beyond, understanding how states are supporting and communicating the importance of equity remains critically important. Our analysis of state guidance documents examined state responses to the need to move rapidly to remote learning and provided insights about equity that can guide future decision making by SEAs and policymakers across the U.S. Additionally, the equity framework developed for this work has the potential to be productively applied by equity advocates, SEAs, district leaders, and other education stakeholders to a broad array of learning environments, including virtual schooling, postsecondary education, and other remote and alternative modes of learning.

As states grapple with remote learning options for the 2020-2021 school year and beyond, SEAs should consider using an equity framework as a blueprint for developing comprehensive guidance on addressing issues of equity. For example, we found that one in five SEA documents did not directly address home learning environments in their guidance. By utilizing an equity framework, states can ensure that their guidance is comprehensive in addressing the major equity considerations for remote learning.

Future Research

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt schooling during the 2020-2021 school year, The Learning Partnership plans to further study the impact of remote learning on students, educators, and schools. Future work will investigate the interaction of remote learning policy and practice at the district level in Illinois. Specifically, we plan to build off of this work on SEA policies for remote learning by using the guidance from the Illinois State Board of Education as context for an examination of the implementation of remote learning in Chicago Public Schools.

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Appendix

Table A. Dimensions of Equity in Remote Learning

Dimension	Subdimensions	Example
1. Access to technology	Recommendations for gathering information about technology or connectivity issues	Surveying families about tech needs
	Recommendations for addressing technology and/or connectivity issues	Providing multiple delivery methods
2. Home learning environments	Recommendations for how schools should communicate expectations to caregivers and students	Providing resources in multiple languages
	Recommendations on school-home support	Providing training/resources for caregivers
3. Teacher and student readiness	Recommendations on professional development and support for teachers	Creating structures for general education teachers to work with specialists
	Recommendations on pedagogy for online learning	Fostering authentic learning experiences
	Recommendations for diverse learners	Supporting English learners
	Recommendations on supports for students	Setting up a remote learning space
4. Programmatic offerings and policy	Recommendations for length of school day	Maximum or minimum instructional hours per day
	Recommendations on grading policies	Implementing credit/no credit policies
	Recommendations about engagement and attendance	Creating interactive, web-based lessons
	Recommendations on directed instruction	Engaging in cross-curricular instruction

Table B. Culturally Responsive Teaching Chart from Alaska's Remote Learning Document

	Need to Know:	Should Be:
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How race, ability, class, language, gender, and other systems of identity influence learning, access to learning How to ensure full participation from all students How to prioritize and address the questions/doubts raised during a lesson How to set a structure around continuous assessment and progress monitoring Lesson planning effectively with others (partnering with students, parents, and other educators) Different students have different learning pace and requirements Building student morale is very important How to use multiple online and social media platforms so they can be flexible with which ones work best for their students How to communicate with and build meaningful relationships with families from different racial, cultural, linguistic, ability, and class backgrounds (Teachers need to pick up the phone and call parents and students; however, they rarely feel comfortable talking one-on-one and tend to lack the relationships necessary to get a clear picture of what families need) How to integrate arts, culture, and creativity in their lessons Techniques for student-centered, independent learning How to adjust remote lessons plans to meet the different needs of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting to know students and families, what they need and want, what they possess and can contribute to continued learning experiences Using empathy interviews and Zoom-based focus groups for participatory planning and curriculum building Learning to teach students at a distance and be patient because these are challenging times for all involved Reaching out one-to-one to families to build the relationships that are necessary to weather challenges Connecting with students through platforms that students are already familiar with and asking questions to get student input Identifying their own biases and assumptions when it comes to remote learning, and identifying how this might affect the learning experiences of students they teach Requesting help when they need it, knowing that they are not alone, while also logging questions, best practices, and other insights that come up in the process of remote teaching (i.e., reflective practice)
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changing dynamics require the creation of space for students to be actively involved in remote classrooms How to talk to students about their concerns and doubts and help them navigate through the change including technology set-up How to involve themselves in some sort of physical activity with students such as yoga, painting, etc. How to spend more time with students (they might have a lot to talk about) How to access free technology, free internet, and free tech support when things break down How to navigate multiple online learning platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeping in mind that this time is just as stressful for the child(ren) as it is for the adults Building community in their apartment buildings, homes, classes, neighborhood, constituencies, etc. to provide mutual learning and support

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to access other crisis supports such as food pantries, rent/mortgage/utility assistance, unemployment, etc. • Ways to support children emotionally during times of crisis • That they are positioned to shape their child's education (i.e., stay on top of school, remain informed, make demands in service of your child(ren)'s education, etc.) 	
Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That race, socioeconomic status, ability, language, and other social forces exacerbate inequities in terms of access to resources, opportunities, power, culturally responsive instruction, and education • How to even the playing field using targeted universal solutions that more heavily support students who require it (Hold high expectation, but also hold the ladder) • How to provide resources necessary to ensure access to and promote teacher competence around culturally responsive remote education • How to oversee the quality of communications between students and the teachers • How to ensure that community/parents needs are taken care of • All the students and teachers have access to the technology and equipment • Academic assessments are designed keeping in mind the change in nature of the delivery of instructions and settings • How to focus more on continuous assessment, as this will enable educators to easily identify students who are struggling with the shift • How to regularly check-in with the staff members • All of the things under "what should teachers know," and how to support teachers in doing those things • Effective outreach methods to families and students outside of the standard robocalls and emails—parent networks, community organizations, social media, community leaders, religious institutions, grocery stores, etc. • How to help students and families access free computers, internet and tech support • How to help students and families access mental and emotional support: online therapy, meditation, relaxation, arts, recreation, etc. • How to help families access crisis supports such as food pantries, rent/mortgage/utility assistance, unemployment, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing their very best to mitigate the possibility for COVID-19 to proliferate (particularly when working with vulnerable communities) • Making sure the basic needs of all students and families continue to be met (e.g. providing bagged meals, as students are learning) • Identifying their own biases and assumptions when it comes to remote learning and identifying how this might affect the learning experiences of students



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knowledge and relationships in the school community so they can amplify and leverage resources and supports 	
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● That the adults in their lives will protect them from harm as best as we can (They need to feel safe and supported) ● How to access multiple online platforms ● (For older students) Some of the same resources above (mental and emotional support, free technology and internet, food pantries, etc.) ● Contact information for at least one trusted adult in their school (or a partner community organization) who can support them ● That they are the greatest fund of knowledge during these times of online connection; that building upon their current ability to interact, communicate and learn through web-based platforms is critical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning in ways that are unbiased and builds on their social and cultural assets as digitally connected beings ● Engaged in meaningful experiences and conversations with peers and educators around culturally relevant academic content and materials ● Challenged in ways that match high expectations and rigor with high quality instruction and learning support

Note: Adapted from *AK Learns Remotely* from Alaska Department of Education and Early Development

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